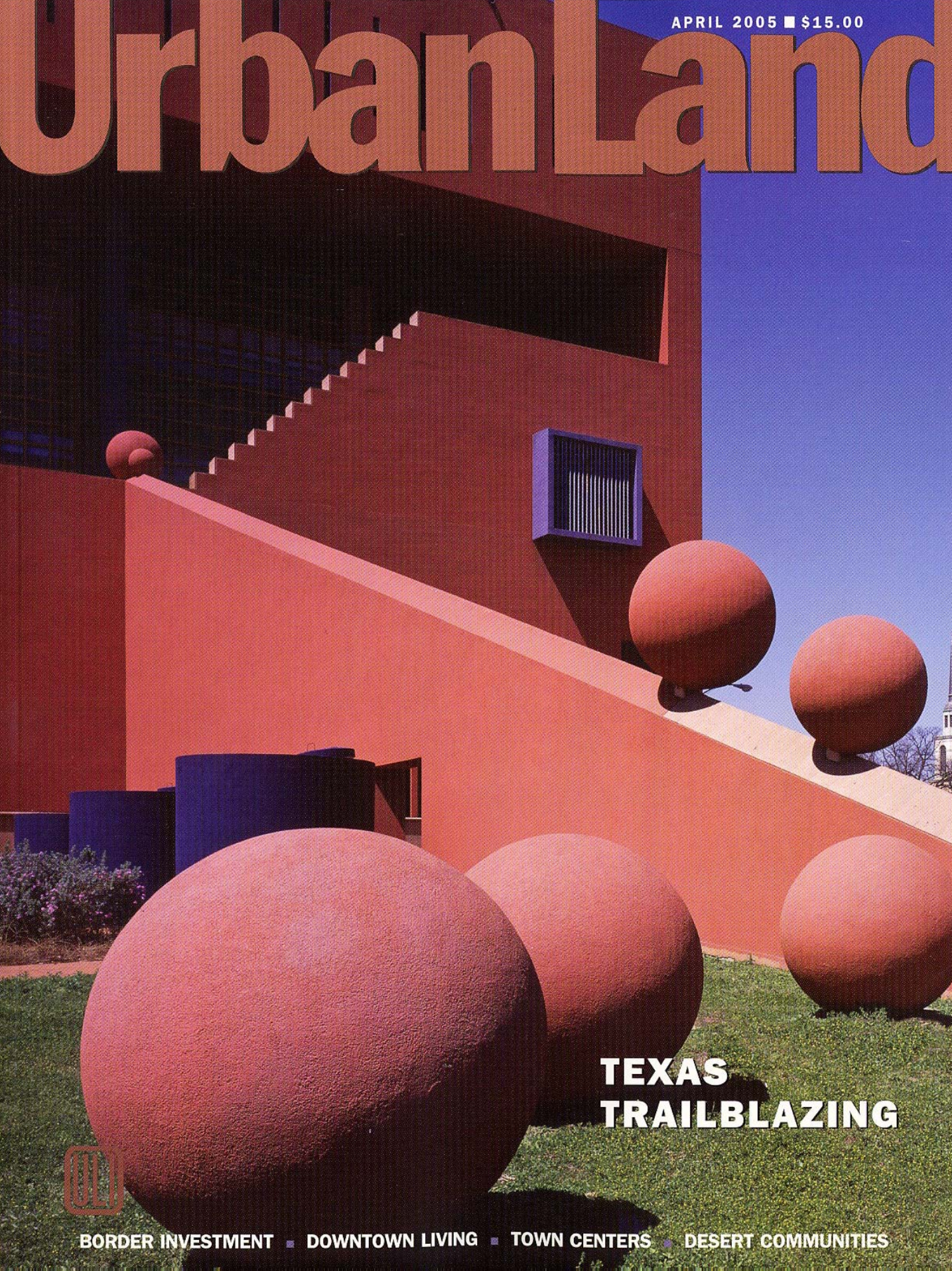


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BORDER INVESTMENT ■ DOWNTOWN LIVING ■ TOWN CENTERS ■ DESERT COMMUNITIES



Centering Towns

Mixed-use town center developments are increasingly becoming a must-have item for suburban and exurban communities across the country.

IN THE ONCE-SLEEPY BEDROOM community of Sugar Land some 20 miles west of Houston, developers are constructing the Sugar Land Town Square, which will feature high-rise buildings with residential lofts, as well as office, retail, and restaurant components, all anchored by the new Sugar Land City Hall. "We are seeing a number of municipal buildings, such as a city hall, now being included in new town center projects," says David Lewis, president of Houston-based Lewis Realty Advisors, a valuation and advisory services firm. "When you are trying to create a main street feel in suburban America, there's nothing like the presence of an authentic city hall, the heartbeat of a community. People crave the feeling of community that many small towns have given us in the past, with the county courthouse being the center of town and social life."

About a thousand miles to the north, in West Des Moines, Iowa, General Growth Properties's Jordan Creek Town Center has introduced a broad selection of shopping and entertainment activities to central Iowa. The 2 million-square-foot master-planned development includes a two-level enclosed shopping center, plus a 3.5-acre lake surrounded by bike trails, pedestrian walkways, and a boardwalk. The development also has a collection of large and specialty retailers in an open-air lifestyle center design. "Shopping centers are evolving into more than just retail," says John Bucksbaum, chief executive of General Growth Properties. "We are creating experiences at our centers. Jordan Creek Town Center is the blueprint for our new developments and redevelopments moving forward."

In Miramar, Florida, city officials have approved construction of a town center that will include municipal uses such as a new city hall, a public library, a cultural center arts park, and an educational facility, all surrounded by residential, retail, office, and entertainment space. A joint venture of Rockefeller Group Development Corporation and Kimco Developers, Inc., is slated to purchase the land earmarked for the mixed-use retail, office, and residential components of the project. The new

ing arrangements, and housing types. The desire of Americans to live in neighborhoods that provide a higher quality of life is expected to result in the creation of even more town centers in the years ahead that integrate housing, office, retail, and entertainment space.

John Torti, president of Torti Gallas and Partners, an architecture, planning, and urban design firm based in Silver Spring, Maryland, says his firm is working on a half dozen town center developments in several areas. Each development is unique to the area, he explains, and developments include what he characterized as the

"true" town center, the "fill the hole in the doughnut" town center, and the "build it and they will come" town center.

A true town center—an area that is, in fact, the governmental and civic core of a municipality—is being built in south Florida's Miramar community, whose new city hall is the centerpiece of its town center. "Miramar does not enjoy the beaches of a Fort Lauderdale or a Palm Beach, but it had profitable tax generators such as big-box and industrial users," says Torti. "Because the city was running out of space in its present city hall, it decided to build a new mixed-use town center neighborhood and purchased a parcel in the geographic middle of the town

for its new city hall and a new performing arts center to make the once-moribund area a desirable live/work/play environment." The city is selling the surrounding parcels to private developers for office, housing, and retail uses to animate the center and to help defray some of the costs of buying the land and building the city hall, he says. "It's very unusual and very exciting. Miramar is a real, honest-to-goodness town center."

In contrast, at Orlando's bustling Baldwin Park is an example of another type of town center—an effort to "fill the hole in the doughnut." The developers of Baldwin Park have transformed a 1,000-acre set of neighborhoods, once the Orlando Naval Training Center, into residential, office, and retail space. "The surrounding area has existing infrastructure and people are already living there. The development, however, is in search of a central place—a civic heart, if you will—in the midst of the new neighborhoods," says Torti. "In this case, the town center is in an area where a full-size Publix

Miramar (left), in Florida, is a "true" town center that brings together municipal, residential, retail, office, and entertainment uses. Orlando's Baldwin Park (right), on the other hand, is an effort to "fill the hole in the doughnut," bringing a central focal point to an existing set of neighborhoods.



development will be a "genuine town center with arts, commerce, social, civic, and government activity," says Mayor Lori Moseley.

The town center concept is changing, developers say. Consumers now demand places offering more urban, walkable facilities that serve as gathering spots for individuals and provide a sense of community through a well-thought-out, cohesive design. Called town centers, transit-oriented developments, urban villages, or main street developments, these new offerings seek to create unique places with lasting value. Already such developments have challenged conventional wisdom about consumers, retailing practices, building design, park-

supermarket is located on a new main street of shops and restaurants with housing above. It is essentially a fourth neighborhood with a main street used as a town center."

The Twinbrook development in Rockville, Maryland, is a similar infill town center. "Its generator is the existing transit station surrounded by well-established residential, employment, and retail neighborhoods," says Torti. "This transit-oriented development creates a new town center of 2.5 million square feet of mixed-use new urbanism where old, underutilized warehouses once existed along the tracks."

Torti says a third category of town center is greenfields development, in which a new town center is used as the generator or marker of the development. An example is Disney's Celebration community in Florida, he says, where developers built the town center first "as a stake in the ground" to identify the place, and it, in turn, became the generator for housing development. "They built the town center upfront and it became an identifiable symbol of the town: a very handsome place that operates on the same set of principles as a town center with wonderful mixed uses—a place where you could live, work, shop, and enjoy. The town center was used as a generator for the residential development that followed."

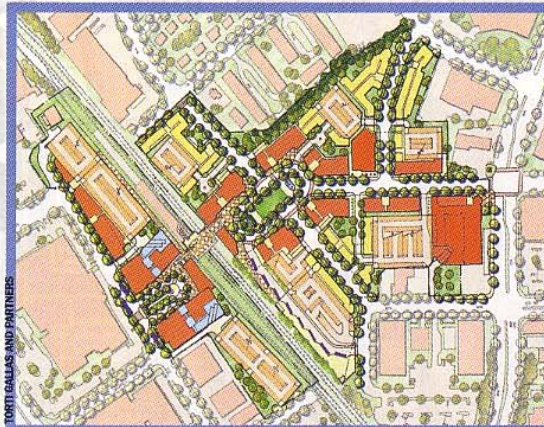
The keys to a successful town center, Torti explains, are numerous high-density mixed uses and an appealing public realm designed especially for pedestrians and their activities. It needs to have good connections to neighborhoods and the region so that people can come and enjoy it, and it must have a mix of activities so it is full of life not only in the day, but also during evenings and weekends. "Thus, today's new town center becomes a place people want to go to as a reflection of their lifestyle," says Torti. "We are basically remaking suburbs that were built over the past five decades to create more intimate, interconnected areas."

The town center concept can be expanded to encompass plans to relieve traffic congestion as well, notes John Ellis, principal at WRT/Solomon E.T.C. of San Francisco. Transit-oriented developments (TODs) as well as town centers are popular in many cities and towns on the West Coast because municipalities are realizing that they need to offer an opportunity for growth without necessarily increasing traffic congestion or continuing sprawl into greenfield sites.

"Transit-oriented development is a hot-button issue today because people realize that as our communities get bigger and our highways become increasingly congested, it makes sense to build higher-density developments around transit networks," says Ellis. In the San Francisco Bay area, for instance, transit-oriented development is being planned along several of the region's transit cor-

ridors, including the 72-mile Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) network, the Caltrain system, and Amtrak's Capitol Corridor. "At many of those stations, the huge surface parking lots that have been destructive to the life of the surrounding community have been rebuilt as mixed-use developments," he says.

Recognizing that marrying mass transit and real estate development could be a smart move, forward-thinking California communities such as Hercules, Hayward, and Mountain View are embracing TOD to revitalize neighborhoods.



Twinbrook, in Rockville, Maryland, replaced old, underused warehouses with a new urban-styled mixed-use transit-oriented development.

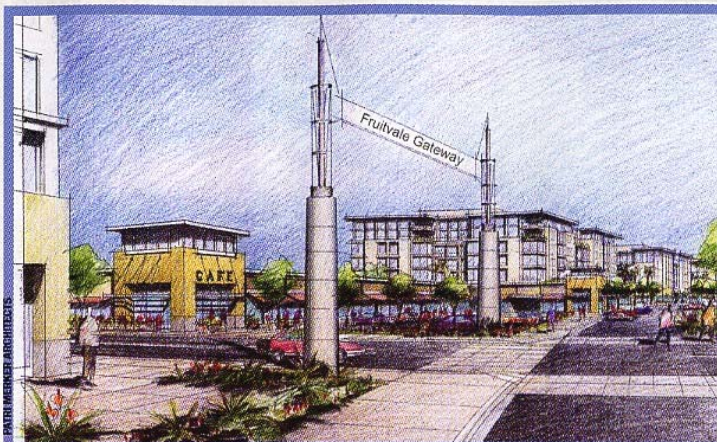


"Several communities have turned surface parking lots into structured parking areas and then built high-density multifamily developments," says Ellis. "Recent examples include the Fruitvale BART mixed-use development and downtown Hayward, where, as master planners, we proposed the new city hall, multifamily housing, and new retail next to the BART station." In Mountain View, WRT/Solomon E.T.C. designed a TOD/residential infill project that demonstrates how development can occur successfully in an upscale suburb while responding to the local context and the needs of the community. "A big part of this plan is obtaining community acceptance," emphasizes Ellis.

One of WRT/Solomon E.T.C.'s most recent projects was a study that reimagined the Hacienda Business Park in Dublin, about 30 miles east of Oakland. The business park consisted of a huge arterial road network with acres of surface parking surrounded by isolated low-

density office buildings. Originally planned in 1985 and adjacent to a new BART station, Hacienda Business Park is a good candidate for a mixed-use community rather than one with a single use. "We worked within the constraints of the existing infrastructure to create a new network of streets and blocks," says Ellis. "Since some 65 percent of the land in the business park was surface parking, we suggested creating a parking district and building parking structures. In addition, we proposed reducing the width of some of the roadways and liberated land for development."

In some California transit-oriented developments, such as the one near the Fruitvale BART station, communities have transformed surface parking lots into high-density multifamily and mixed-use developments.



Such reconstruction is occurring all over the United States. "We must continually come up with new ideas for places that have reached the end of their natural economic cycle, such as dead shopping malls, empty business parks, or defunct brownfield sites, and create more compact, mixed-use communities that are smarter and more sustainable," says Ellis.

Near the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland, for example, San Francisco's Patri Merker Architects is designing a mixed-use development that consists of residential condominiums and retail lease space. Piero Patri, a principal at Patri Merker, says the idea is to be as flexible as possible with new TOD developments. "Many cities are grappling with similar problems, so it's an interesting challenge," he says. "Our key idea is to offer flexible space in a development that will evolve over time."

As a result of the increasing popularity of public transit and the importance of smart growth initiatives, the land surrounding transportation hubs has grown significantly more valuable, continues Nate Cherry, a vice president in the Los Angeles office of Baltimore, Maryland-based RTKL Associates's planning/urban design group. Consequently, developers and municipalities are looking to increase the density and to diversify the uses around these hubs. "What used to be just retail is now retail, office, and residential," says Cherry. "For example, in Anaheim, California, the downtown redevelopment project that began 20 years ago has evolved to accommodate a changing economic climate. As traffic woes have heightened in the region, development has demanded more than an office base. Today, residential is a major component in Anaheim's town center redevelopment plan."

Cherry says he is also seeing changes in how TOD projects are being created. "There's significantly more diversity in the kinds of

developers getting involved in a single project, and public agencies are playing a far more proactive role in assembling a good development team," he explains. "In California's San Gabriel Valley around Pasadena, developers are scrambling to get involved in these transit projects because they want to take advantage of

the high-density options. It took the market ten to 15 years to realize that transit is a plus, and now these are some of the best projects to be involved in."

This kind of development has a promising future, Cherry emphasized, adding that businesses are beginning to support transit routes, which suggests a heightened awareness of the financial benefits of transit. "Consecutive federal transportation laws are increasingly broadening funds to support transit projects," he says. "And, with every success, developers and planners are growing more knowledgeable on how to successfully implement this crucial new type of development."

A number of other developers throughout the country have latched on to the new development concepts. Simon Property Group of Indianapolis and Atlanta's Ben Carter Properties recently opened St. Johns Town Center in Jacksonville, Florida, a mixed-use town center development that will include 225 townhouses, 225 luxury apartments, two hotels, and 1.5 million square feet of retail, restaurant, and entertainment space.

Lewis notes that developers will continue to create town centers, transit-oriented developments, and other new developments designed to transform suburbs from satellite communities into more self-sufficient areas that have urban complexity without urban concentration.

"Town centers and transit-oriented developments are a way for developers and municipalities to create their own center, their own identity," says Lewis. "It is an attempt to make a development stand out, while at the same time give residents a main street feeling. The concepts will continue for some time to come." ■

MIKE SHERIDAN IS A FINANCIAL JOURNALIST BASED IN HOUSTON.